

Paradise in the Kronotsky Reserve

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In 1933, the prominent Soviet volcanologist Boris Piip visited the Uzon caldera. "It is delightful to distraction here," he wrote. "The stunning view of the caldera stirred me to the depths of my soul. The moon emerged and illuminated our tents and campfire. What a beautiful sight it was against the dark blue walls of the caldera and the sparkling silver lake ... When we were planning our trip, previous visitors said we would be going to the most beautiful place on Kamchatka. Indeed, I am now convinced of this: Here there is no September, no summer, no fall — here, now is paradise."

Seventy-eight Septembers later, I had a chance to see Uzon myself. Instead of hiking through the Kronotsky Reserve, where the caldera is located, we traveled there by helicopter. While Piip saw the caldera under moonlight, we saw it steaming at noon; while he split his time between drinking tea by his tent and studying the surrounding thermal field, we hurried along wooden paths for all of thirty minutes. Piip wrote about the "peace and joy" that filled his soul during his visit. During ours, it was difficult to feel much beyond anxiety from the guide's warnings of roaming bears.

Our circumstances were different, yet Piip's testimony still seems to capture the isolated beauty of a trip to the caldera perfectly. "There is no better in the world," he wrote then. It feels that way still. We emerged from our Mi-8 helicopter into a land painted red with berry bushes and edged with snow-capped mountains. A shallow lake rested beyond the hills. Two reserve inspectors holding rifles watched us pass. I found Uzon even more stunning than the Valley of the Geysers. Bright, open, and strange, the caldera looked like an alien heaven.

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